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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of helping college composition students to become stylistically competent and cites a study that examined the essays of 32 college students and 27 skilled adult writers. T-unit measurements revealed that there is little difference between the groups in the number of clauses per T-unit, but the skilled writers used more words per T-unit than did the student writers. To further analyze this difference in T-unit length, measurements were taken of words in "free modifiers"--those nonrestrictive modifiers occurring before, within, or after the main clause and set off by punctuation. These measurements revealed that almost all differences in T-unit length result from an increasing number of words in free modifiers. Moreover, the students tended to place free modifiers before the main clause, while skilled writers used free modifiers more often within and after the main clause. The paper concludes that, since research shows that syntactic maturity correlates with writing quality, teachers should begin a college writing course by emphasizing the development of syntactic skills. (RL)

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Measuring Growth in College Writing

While I was in graduate school, paying my dues as a graduate teaching assistant, a professor of business administration once told me that my job as a teacher of writing was to teach freshmen how to spell and where to put their commas. I didn't have a ready answer for him then, but I did know that most of the student papers I received would still have been mediocre even with flawless spelling and uniform punctuation. Most of my ideas on writing have changed since then, but that impression has changed very little.

Certainly, gross errors in spelling, punctuation, and usage are the ones that leap off the page at you, the ones quoted in Newsweek and other periodicals to show how poorly the students really do write these days. But if we have only to teach Johnny to spell and punctuate in conformity with the dictates of edited English, our jobs would be downright cushy. We could hand him a style sheet and a dictionary on the first day of class, wire him with electrodes, and shock him every time he made a mistake.

I doubt if we can ever have this best of all possible worlds, and even if we could, the common complaints of teachers point to problems more extensive than the blemishes of spelling and punctuation: students write in "baby talk," they cannot express themselves on paper, and their essays lack depth and development,

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just to name a few. Any teacher who has taught composition knows in essence how the prose style of essays from a typical class of college freshmen differs from essays written by skilled adults. For the most part, skilled writers use more specific description and support than do college freshmen, their sentences are more varied, their lexical resources broader, and their language more sensitive to context.

These qualities which we prize so highly are, as we all know, difficult to describe in more exact terms and even more difficult to teach. However, there are a few indices which describe competence in one of the areas of stylistic achievement--the level of elaboration in sentences, or what researchers call "syntactic maturity." The more useful of these indices are products of the research of Kellogg W. Hunt.[1] Hunt discovered when he was analyzing the prose of younger children that sentence length was not a particularly reliable measurement of syntactic maturity because of the problem of determining what a sentence is, especially in the writing of younger children. Hunt needed an objective unit which was dependent upon the grammatical skills of the writer, not his or her facility for punctuating consistently.

For this purpose, he developed the concept of the "T-unit," which eliminates the need of a researcher to determine punctuation. A T-unit is comprised of a main clause and all full or reduced clauses embedded within it; in other words, a T-unit is any construction which could correctly be punctuated as a sentence, but not necessarily is a sentence, without fragments or other debris left over.[2] Hunt

measured the prose of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders, as well as essays in Harpers and The Atlantic, and found a steady growth through the grades in the number of words per T-unit and the average clause length.[3]

HUNT'S SYNOPSIS OF CLAUSE AND T-UNIT GROWTH

	Words per Clause	Clauses per T-unit	Words per T-unit
Grade 4	6.6	1.30	8.6
Grade 8	8.1	1.42	11.5
Grade 12	8.6	1.68	14.4
Skilled Adults	11.5	1.74	20.3

Similar measurements were taken from 32 college students beginning freshman composition at the University of North Dakota by means of an in-class essay on a narrative descriptive topic and contrasted to the prose of twenty-seven skilled adult writers offered to the students as models.[4] These essays are included in Donald Hall and D.L. Emblem's A Writer's Reader, a collection which exhibits a wide variety of contemporary styles and classifies essays by type, thus providing a way of comparing similar modes of writing. The mean scores for the college freshmen and the authors in the Hall-Emblem anthology are quite close to Hunt's norms, particularly in clause length which Hunt found to be the most important index of syntactic growth among older writers.[5]

CLAUSE AND T-UNIT LENGTH IN FRESHMEN AND ANTHOLOGIZED WRITERS

	Words per Clause	Clauses per T-unit	Words per T-unit
College Freshmen	8.9	1.62	14.5
Hall-Emblem Writers	11.3	1.67	18.9

These figures, however, tell us little that we don't know already, that the sentences of skilled adults are more elaborate than those of students beginning a freshman composition class. A third index, the number of clauses per T-unit or the subordination ratio, gives some insight into the difference in T-unit length between college students and skilled adults. The subordination ratio of the college freshmen is 1.62, slightly below Hunt's mean for 12th graders, but somewhat surprisingly, the subordination ratio of the Hall-Emblem writers is also slightly below Hunt's mean for 12th graders.[6] The mean for the narrative and descriptive essays in the Hall-Emblem anthology, 1.55 clauses per T-unit, is even lower than the student mean. Thus, we can rule out the possibility of additional subordinate clauses producing the difference in T-unit length between the student writers and the Hall-Emblem authors.

Another set of measurements devised by the late Francis Christensen was taken to learn more about the growth in T-unit length between college students and skilled adults. The most important of these indices is the percentage of total words occurring in what Christensen called "free modifiers," any element coming

before the main clause and elements embedded within or after the main clause set off by commas, dashes, or parentheses.[7] In grammatical terms, free modifiers are nonrestrictive modifiers, consisting primarily of absolutes, appositives, participial, infinitival and adjective phrases, and certain types of subordinate clauses, relative clauses, and prepositional phrases. Free modifiers are not defined as precisely as Hunt's T-unit--for one thing, free modifiers are to some extent dependent upon punctuation--but the label does conveniently group several constructions frequently found in the prose of skilled writers.

For the essays in the Hall-Emblem anthology which I measured, the mean percentage of total words occurring in free modifiers is 29.4; for the student essays the percentage is 16.1. Only 3 of the 27 essays in the Hall-Emblem anthology have less than twenty percent of the total words in free modifiers; only 9 of the 32 student essays have more than twenty percent, just 2 have more than twenty-five percent.

PLACEMENT AND PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL WORDS IN FREE MODIFIERS

	Mean % of Total Words in Free Modifiers	% in Initial Position	% in Medial Position	% in Final Position
College Freshmen	16.1	73.2	4.9	21.9
Hall-Emblem Writers	29.4	30.0	16.2	53.8

Nearly all the difference in T-unit length between the anthologized writers and the student writers is a result of an increase in the number of words in free modifiers. Excluding free modifiers, the mean of the essays in the Hall-Emblem anthology is 12.4 words per T-unit, very close to the student mean excluding free modifiers of 12.2 words. When the total number of words in free modifiers is broken down into three categories, elements before the main clause, elements embedded within the main clause, and elements following the main clause, another interesting contrast between the student essays and the Hall-Emblem essays becomes apparent. The students display an overwhelming tendency to use free modifiers before the main clause--almost seventy-five percent of the words in free modifiers appear initially. A very different trend occurs in the Hall-Emblem essays, where over half the total words in free modifiers are placed at the end. The narrative and descriptive essays in the Hall-Emblem anthology are even more heavily weighted toward placing free modifiers in final position.

Percentages in individual essays illustrate this tendency even more emphatically. Only 3 of the 27 essays measured in the Hall-Emblem anthology have more words in initial free modifiers than in final, but 27 of the 32 student essays have more words in initial position than in final. Ten students place free modifiers only in initial position, another ten have more than sixty percent of words in free modifiers before the main clause. Just 13 of the 32 student essays have any medial modifiers. In contrast, every essay measured in the Hall-Emblem anthology has free modifiers in medial

and final position; only one essay places the majority of words in free modifiers before the main clause.

Examples of dangling and misplaced modifiers in student papers suggest a compulsion to put these elements before the main clause. One such instance reads: "Dan had the look of a lumberjack. With a red plaid shirt, broad shoulders, and a bushy moustache, you could tell he had been around." Clearly, "with a red plaid shirt, broad shoulders, and a bushy moustache" belongs at the end of the first sentence and not at the beginning of the second. It's possible that the student mispunctuated the two sentences, but the evidence points to a strong preference in student writing for placing free modifiers before the main clause.

Part of the process of becoming a skilled writer is gaining the ability to embed sentences in a variety of ways and to manipulate constructions, such as absolutes, rarely used in speech. We can assume that most writers have learned these skills through reading and through practice, but in the limited class time of a college writing course, we can hardly trust simple exposure to good writing to produce a significant improvement in our students. Two-thirds of of the students whose essays I analyzed will never approximate the prose of skilled writers no matter how well the students spell and punctuate because their syntactic repertoire is limited to a handful of options. Recent research has successfully correlated an increase in syntactic maturity with an increase in the overall quality of student essays on both the secondary and college levels.[8] For me, this is more than sufficient justification to begin a college writing course with emphasis on the development of syntactic skills.

Notes

[1]Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965); Syntactic Maturity in Schoolchildren and Adults (Chicago: Society for Research in Child Development, 1970).

[2]Hence a simple or complex sentence contains one T-unit, a compound sentence, two T-units. See Grammatical Structures, pp. 20-22.

[3]Hunt's counts include only full clauses with finite subjects and verbs. See Hunt's letter to Francis Christensen on this point quoted in Christensen's "The Problem of Defining a Mature Style," English Journal, 57 (1968), 576, n. 2.

[4]These statistics are based on writing samples of just over 400 words, and the counts follow procedures described by Frank O'Hare in Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1973), pp. 46-49.

[5]Grammatical Structures, p. 57.

[6]Ibid. Hunt found only a slight growth in the subordination ratio after the twelfth grade.

[7]Notes Toward a New Rhetoric (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 5-9.

[8]Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining; Warren E. Combs, "Further Effects of Sentence Combining Practice on Writing Ability," Research in the Teaching of English, 10 (Fall, 1976), 137-49; Elray L. Pedersen, "Improving Syntactic and Conceptual Fluency in the Writing of Language Arts Students Through Extended Practice in Sentence Combining," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1976; Andrew Kerek, Donald A. Daiker, Max Morenberg, "The Effects of Intensive Sentence Combining on the Writing Ability of College Freshmen," read at the Conference on Language and Style, Queens College, April 16, 1977.

A SYNOPSIS OF ESSAYS INCLUDED IN A WRITER'S READER

	Words per Clause	Clauses per T-unit	Words per T-unit	% of words in f.m.	% in init.	% in med.	% in final
Descriptive							
Dillard	13.1	1.3	17.7	28.0	34.2	16.7	49.1
Woolf	15.3	1.6	25.1	42.6	9.4	15.9	74.7
Bogdanovich	8.5	1.7	14.5	39.7	18.0	4.4	77.6
Berry	10.7	1.3	13.6	35.2	29.2	16.7	54.1
E.B. White	10.9	1.9	20.8	33.7	17.9	4.3	77.8
Narrative							
Parrish	10.0	1.4	14.0	8.6	19.4	13.9	66.7
Angelou	10.5	1.7	18.3	25.7	25.9	25.9	48.2
Mailer	12.8	1.4	18.3	39.6	41.3	3.0	55.7
Ephron	9.0	1.7	15.3	27.1	76.8	2.7	20.5
W. White	11.4	1.8	20.5	15.4	17.5	25.4	57.1
Autobiographical							
Conroy	16.6	1.3	20.8	41.1	29.2	4.7	66.1
Wright	8.7	1.5	13.3	9.8	46.1	23.1	30.8
Exley	9.7	1.8	17.4	40.5	26.1	8.0	65.9
Hellman	8.6	1.8	15.5	24.8	0	15.0	85.0
Momaday	10.9	1.1	11.9	23.9	50.0	8.3	41.7
Narrative-Descriptive Group Mean	11.1	1.55	17.1	29.0	29.4	12.5	58.0

	Words per Clause	Clauses per T-unit	Words per T-unit	% of words in f.m.	% in init.	% in med.	% in final
Expository							
Bleibtreu	10.6	1.6	17.3	27.9	44.6	5.8	49.6
Breslin	10.6	1.6	17.2	23.5	38.2	20.6	41.2
Thomas	12.9	1.8	23.8	44.2	18.5	3.5	78.0
Axthelm	13.8	1.2	16.7	39.8	23.9	8.8	67.3
Lawrence	9.7	1.3	12.4	26.2	27.1	3.7	69.2
Ellison	11.7	1.6	19.1	31.2	29.8	29.0	41.2
Warren	13.3	1.6	21.7	27.1	42.0	18.7	39.3
Argumentative							
Friedenberg	10.1	3.0	30.4	28.3	24.0	14.9	61.2
Pirsig	7.4	1.7	12.8	12.7	17.3	46.2	36.5
Mead	13.9	2.4	33.1	37.2	40.6	50.0	9.4
Berton	10.8	2.1	22.7	23.0	16.0	40.4	43.6
Tuchman	14.5	1.9	27.1	38.1	46.5	7.7	45.8
Expository-Argumentative Group Mean	11.6	1.87	21.2	29.9	30.7	20.8	48.5
Mean for Both Groups	11.3	1.67	18.9	29.4	30.0	16.2	53.8